**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "

**Chapter 3 Letters from No One**  
   
The escape of the Brazilian boa constrictor earned Harry his longest-ever punishment. By the time he was allowed out of his cupboard again, the summer holidays had started and Dudley had already broken his new video camera, crashed his remote control airplane, and, first time out on his racing bike, knocked down old Mrs. Figg as she crossed Privet Drive on her crutches.  
  
Harry was glad school was over, but there was no escaping Dudley's gang, who visited the house every single day. Piers, Dennis, Malcolm, and Gordon were all big and stupid, but as Dudley was the biggest and stupidest of the lot, he was the leader. The rest of them were all quite happy to join in Dudley's favorite sport: Harry Hunting.  
  
This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley. Dudley had been accepted at Uncle Vernon's old private school, Smeltings. Piers Polkiss was going there too. Harry, on the other hand, was going to Stonewall High, the local public school. Dudley thought this was very funny.  
  
"They stuff people's heads down the toilet the first day at Stonewall," he told Harry. "Want to come upstairs and practice?"  
  
"No, thanks," said Harry. "The poor toilet's never had anything as horrible as your head down it -- it might be sick. " Then he ran, before Dudley could work out what he'd said.  
  
One day in July, Aunt Petunia took Dudley to London to buy his Smeltings uniform, leaving Harry at Mrs. Figg's. Mrs. Figg wasn't as bad as usual. It turned out she'd broken her leg tripping over one of her cats, and she didn't seem quite as fond of them as before. She let Harry watch television and gave him a bit of chocolate cake that tasted as though she'd had it for several years.  
  
That evening, Dudley paraded around the living room for the family in his brand-new uniform. Smeltings' boys wore maroon tailcoats, orange knickerbockers, and flat straw hats called boaters. They also carried knobbly sticks, used for hitting each other while the teachers weren't looking. This was supposed to be good training for later life.  
  
As he looked at Dudley in his new knickerbockers, Uncle Vernon said gruffly that it was the proudest moment of his life. Aunt Petunia burst into tears and said she couldn't believe it was her Ickle Dudleykins, he looked so handsome and grown-up. Harry didn't trust himself to speak. He thought two of his ribs might already have cracked from trying not to laugh.

There was a horrible smell in the kitchen the next morning when Harry went in for breakfast. It seemed to be coming from a large metal tub in the sink. He went to have a look. The tub was full of what looked like dirty rags swimming in gray water.  
  
"What's this?" he asked Aunt Petunia. Her lips tightened as they always did if he dared to ask a question.  
  
"Your new school uniform," she said.  
  
Harry looked in the bowl again.  
  
"Oh," he said, "I didn't realize it had to be so wet. "  
  
"Don't be stupid," snapped Aunt Petunia. "I'm dyeing some of Dudley's old things gray for you. It'll look just like everyone else's when I've finished. "  
  
Harry seriously doubted this, but thought it best not to argue. He sat down at the table and tried not to think about how he was going to look on his first day at Stonewall High -- like he was wearing bits of old elephant skin, probably.  
  
Dudley and Uncle Vernon came in, both with wrinkled noses because of the smell from Harry's new uniform. Uncle Vernon opened his newspaper as usual and Dudley banged his Smelting stick, which he carried everywhere, on the table.  
  
They heard the click of the mail slot and flop of letters on the doormat.  
  
"Get the mail, Dudley," said Uncle Vernon from behind his paper.  
  
"Make Harry get it. "  
  
"Get the mail, Harry. "  
  
"Make Dudley get it. "  
  
"Poke him with your Smelting stick, Dudley. "  
  
Harry dodged the Smelting stick and went to get the mail. Three things lay on the doormat: a postcard from Uncle Vernon's sister Marge, who was vacationing on the Isle of Wight, a brown envelope that looked like a bill, and -- a letter for Harry.  
  
Harry picked it up and stared at it, his heart twanging like a giant elastic band. No one, ever, in his whole life, had written to him. Who would? He had no friends, no other relatives -- he didn't belong to the library, so he'd never even got rude notes asking for books back. Yet here it was, a letter, addressed so plainly there could be no mistake:

Mr. H. Potter  
  
The Cupboard under the Stairs  
  
4 Privet Drive  
  
Little Whinging  
  
Surrey  
  
The envelope was thick and heavy, made of yellowish parchment, and the address was written in emerald-green ink. There was no stamp.  
  
Turning the envelope over, his hand trembling, Harry saw a purple wax seal bearing a coat of arms; a lion, an eagle, a badger, and a snake surrounding a large letter H.  
  
"Hurry up, boy!" shouted Uncle Vernon from the kitchen. "What are you doing, checking for letter bombs?" He chuckled at his own joke.  
  
Harry went back to the kitchen, still staring at his letter. He handed Uncle Vernon the bill and the postcard, sat down, and slowly began to open the yellow envelope.  
  
Uncle Vernon ripped open the bill, snorted in disgust, and flipped over the postcard.  
  
"Marge's ill," he informed Aunt Petunia. "Ate a funny whelk. . . "  
  
"Dad!" said Dudley suddenly. "Dad, Harry's got something!"  
  
Harry was on the point of unfolding his letter, which was written on the same heavy parchment as the envelope, when it was jerked sharply out of his hand by Uncle Vernon.  
  
"That's mine!" said Harry, trying to snatch it back.  
  
"Who'd be writing to you?" sneered Uncle Vernon, shaking the letter open with one hand and glancing at it. His face went from red to green faster than a set of traffic lights. And it didn't stop there. Within seconds it was the grayish white of old porridge.  
  
"P-P-Petunia!" he gasped.  
  
Dudley tried to grab the letter to read it, but Uncle Vernon held it high out of his reach. Aunt Petunia took it curiously and read the first line. For a moment it looked as though she might faint. She clutched her throat and made a choking noise.  
  
"Vernon! Oh my goodness -- Vernon!"  
  
They stared at each other, seeming to have forgotten that Harry and Dudley were still in the room. Dudley wasn't used to being ignored. He gave his father a sharp tap on the head with his Smelting stick.  
  
"I want to read that letter," he said loudly.  
  
"I want to read it," said Harry furiously, "as it's mine. "

"Get out, both of you," croaked Uncle Vernon, stuffing the letter back inside its envelope.  
  
Harry didn't move.  
  
"I WANT MY LETTER!" he shouted.  
  
"Let me see it!" demanded Dudley.  
  
"OUT!" roared Uncle Vernon, and he took both Harry and Dudley by the scruffs of their necks and threw them into the hall, slamming the kitchen door behind them. Harry and Dudley promptly had a furious but silent fight over who would listen at the keyhole; Dudley won, so Harry, his glasses dangling from one ear, lay flat on his stomach to listen at the crack between door and floor.  
  
"Vernon," Aunt Petunia was saying in a quivering voice, "look at the address -- how could they possibly know where he sleeps? You don't think they're watching the house?"  
  
"Watching -- spying -- might be following us," muttered Uncle Vernon wildly.  
  
"But what should we do, Vernon? Should we write back? Tell them we don't want--"  
  
Harry could see Uncle Vernon's shiny black shoes pacing up and down the kitchen.  
  
"No," he said finally. "No, we'll ignore it. If they don't get an answer. . . Yes, that's best. . . we won't do anything. . . "  
  
"But--"  
  
"I'm not having one in the house, Petunia! Didn't we swear when we took him in we'd stamp out that dangerous nonsense?"  
  
That evening when he got back from work, Uncle Vernon did something he'd never done before; he visited Harry in his cupboard.  
  
"Where's my letter?" said Harry, the moment Uncle Vernon had squeezed through the door. "Who's writing to me?"  
  
"No one. It was addressed to you by mistake," said Uncle Vernon shortly. "I have burned it. "  
  
"It was not a mistake," said Harry angrily, "it had my cupboard on it. "  
  
"SILENCE!" yelled Uncle Vernon, and a couple of spiders fell from the ceiling. He took a few deep breaths and then forced his face into a smile, which looked quite painful.  
  
"Er -- yes, Harry -- about this cupboard. Your aunt and I have been thinking. . . you're really getting a bit big for it. . . we think it might be nice if you moved into Dudley's second bedroom.

"Why?" said Harry.  
  
"Don't ask questions!" snapped his uncle. "Take this stuff upstairs, now. "  
  
The Dursleys' house had four bedrooms: one for Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, one for visitors (usually Uncle Vernon's sister, Marge), one where Dudley slept, and one where Dudley kept all the toys and things that wouldn't fit into his first bedroom. It only took Harry one trip upstairs to move everything he owned from the cupboard to this room. He sat down on the bed and stared around him. Nearly everything in here was broken. The month-old video camera was lying on top of a small, working tank Dudley had once driven over the next door neighbor's dog; in the corner was Dudley's first-ever television set, which he'd put his foot through when his favorite program had been canceled; there was a large birdcage, which had once held a parrot that Dudley had swapped at school for a real air rifle, which was up on a shelf with the end all bent because Dudley had sat on it. Other shelves were full of books. They were the only things in the room that looked as though they'd never been touched.  
  
From downstairs came the sound of Dudley bawling at his mother, I don't want him in there. . . I need that room. . . make him get out. . . "  
  
Harry sighed and stretched out on the bed. Yesterday he'd have given anything to be up here. Today he'd rather be back in his cupboard with that letter than up here without it.  
  
Next morning at breakfast, everyone was rather quiet. Dudley was in shock. He'd screamed, whacked his father with his Smelting stick, been sick on purpose, kicked his mother, and thrown his tortoise through the greenhouse roof, and he still didn't have his room back. Harry was thinking about this time yesterday and bitterly wishing he'd opened the letter in the hall. Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia kept looking at each other darkly.  
  
When the mail arrived, Uncle Vernon, who seemed to be trying to be nice to Harry, made Dudley go and get it. They heard him banging things with his Smelting stick all the way down the hall. Then he shouted, "There's another one! 'Mr. H. Potter, The Smallest Bedroom, 4 Privet Drive -- '"  
  
With a strangled cry, Uncle Vernon leapt from his seat and ran down the hall, Harry right behind him. Uncle Vernon had to wrestle Dudley to the ground to get the letter from him, which was made difficult by the fact that Harry had grabbed Uncle Vernon around the neck from behind. After a minute of confused fighting, in which everyone got hit a lot by the Smelting stick, Uncle Vernon straightened up, gasping for breath, with Harry's letter clutched in his hand.

"Go to your cupboard -- I mean, your bedroom," he wheezed at Harry. "Dudley -- go -- just go. "  
  
Harry walked round and round his new room. Someone knew he had moved out of his cupboard and they seemed to know he hadn't received his first letter. Surely that meant they'd try again? And this time he'd make sure they didn't fail. He had a plan.  
  
The repaired alarm clock rang at six o'clock the next morning. Harry turned it off quickly and dressed silently. He mustn't wake the Dursleys. He stole downstairs without turning on any of the lights.  
  
He was going to wait for the postman on the corner of Privet Drive and get the letters for number four first. His heart hammered as he crept across the dark hall toward the front door --  
  
"AAAAARRRGH!"  
  
Harry leapt into the air; he'd trodden on something big and squashy on the doormat -- something alive!  
  
Lights clicked on upstairs and to his horror Harry realized that the big, squashy something had been his uncle's face. Uncle Vernon had been lying at the foot of the front door in a sleeping bag, clearly making sure that Harry didn't do exactly what he'd been trying to do. He shouted at Harry for about half an hour and then told him to go and make a cup of tea. Harry shuffled miserably off into the kitchen and by the time he got back, the mail had arrived, right into Uncle Vernon's lap. Harry could see three letters addressed in green ink.  
  
"I want -- " he began, but Uncle Vernon was tearing the letters into pieces before his eyes.  
  
Uncle Vernon didn't go to work that day. He stayed at home and nailed up the mail slot.  
  
"See," he explained to Aunt Petunia through a mouthful of nails, "if they can't deliver them they'll just give up. "  
  
"I'm not sure that'll work, Vernon. "  
  
"Oh, these people's minds work in strange ways, Petunia, they're not like you and me," said Uncle Vernon, trying to knock in a nail with the piece of fruitcake Aunt Petunia had just brought him.

On Friday, no less than twelve letters arrived for Harry. As they couldn't go through the mail slot they had been pushed under the door, slotted through the sides, and a few even forced through the small window in the downstairs bathroom.  
  
Uncle Vernon stayed at home again. After burning all the letters, he got out a hammer and nails and boarded up the cracks around the front and back doors so no one could go out. He hummed "Tiptoe Through the Tulips" as he worked, and jumped at small noises.  
  
On Saturday, things began to get out of hand. Twenty-four letters to Harry found their way into the house, rolled up and hidden inside each of the two dozen eggs that their very confused milkman had handed Aunt Petunia through the living room window. While Uncle Vernon made furious telephone calls to the post office and the dairy trying to find someone to complain to, Aunt Petunia shredded the letters in her food processor.  
  
"Who on earth wants to talk to you this badly?" Dudley asked Harry in amazement.  
  
On Sunday morning, Uncle Vernon sat down at the breakfast table looking tired and rather ill, but happy.  
  
"No post on Sundays," he reminded them cheerfully as he spread marmalade on his newspapers, "no damn letters today--"  
  
Something came whizzing down the kitchen chimney as he spoke and caught him sharply on the back of the head. Next moment, thirty or forty letters came pelting out of the fireplace like bullets. The Dursleys ducked, but Harry leapt into the air trying to catch one --  
  
"Out! OUT!"  
  
Uncle Vernon seized Harry around the waist and threw him into the hall. When Aunt Petunia and Dudley had run out with their arms over their faces, Uncle Vernon slammed the door shut. They could hear the letters still streaming into the room, bouncing off the walls and floor.  
  
"That does it," said Uncle Vernon, trying to speak calmly but pulling great tufts out of his mustache at the same time. "I want you all back here in five minutes ready to leave. We're going away. Just pack some clothes. No arguments!"  
  
He looked so dangerous with half his mustache missing that no one dared argue. Ten minutes later they had wrenched their way through the boarded-up doors and were in the car, speeding toward the highway. Dudley was sniffling in the back seat; his father had hit him round the head for holding them up while he tried to pack his television, VCR, and computer in his sports bag.

They drove. And they drove. Even Aunt Petunia didn't dare ask where they were going. Every now and then Uncle Vernon would take a sharp turn and drive in the opposite direction for a while.  
  
"Shake 'em off. . . shake 'em off," he would mutter whenever he did this.  
  
They didn't stop to eat or drink all day. By nightfall Dudley was howling. He'd never had such a bad day in his life. He was hungry, he'd missed five television programs he'd wanted to see, and he'd never gone so long without blowing up an alien on his computer.  
  
Uncle Vernon stopped at last outside a gloomy-looking hotel on the outskirts of a big city. Dudley and Harry shared a room with twin beds and damp, musty sheets. Dudley snored but Harry stayed awake, sitting on the windowsill, staring down at the lights of passing cars and wondering. . .  
  
They ate stale cornflakes and cold tinned tomatoes on toast for breakfast the next day. They had just finished when the owner of the hotel came over to their table.  
  
"'Scuse me, but is one of you Mr. H. Potter? Only I got about an 'undred of these at the front desk. "  
  
She held up a letter so they could read the green ink address:  
  
Mr. H. Potter  
  
Room 17  
  
Railview Hotel  
  
Cokeworth  
  
Harry made a grab for the letter but Uncle Vernon knocked his hand out of the way. The woman stared.  
  
"I'll take them," said Uncle Vernon, standing up quickly and following her from the dining room.  
  
"Wouldn't it be better just to go home, dear?" Aunt Petunia suggested timidly, hours later, but Uncle Vernon didn't seem to hear her. Exactly what he was looking for, none of them knew. He drove them into the middle of a forest, got out, looked around, shook his head, got back in the car, and off they went again. The same thing happened in the middle of a plowed field, halfway across a suspension bridge, and at the top of a multilevel parking garage.  
  
"Daddy's gone mad, hasn't he?" Dudley asked Aunt Petunia dully late that afternoon. Uncle Vernon had parked at the coast, locked them all inside the car, and disappeared.

It started to rain. Great drops beat on the roof of the car. Dudley sniveled.  
  
"It's Monday," he told his mother. "The Great Humberto's on tonight. I want to stay somewhere with a television. "  
  
Monday. This reminded Harry of something. If it was Monday -- and you could usually count on Dudley to know the days the week, because of television -- then tomorrow, Tuesday, was Harry's eleventh birthday. Of course, his birthdays were never exactly fun -- last year, the Dursleys had given him a coat hanger and a pair of Uncle Vernon's old socks. Still, you weren't eleven every day.  
  
Uncle Vernon was back and he was smiling. He was also carrying a long, thin package and didn't answer Aunt Petunia when she asked what he'd bought.  
  
"Found the perfect place!" he said. "Come on! Everyone out!"  
  
It was very cold outside the car. Uncle Vernon was pointing at what looked like a large rock way out at sea. Perched on top of the rock was the most miserable little shack you could imagine. One thing was certain, there was no television in there.  
  
"Storm forecast for tonight!" said Uncle Vernon gleefully, clapping his hands together. "And this gentleman's kindly agreed to lend us his boat!"  
  
A toothless old man came ambling up to them, pointing, with a rather wicked grin, at an old rowboat bobbing in the iron-gray water below them.  
  
"I've already got us some rations," said Uncle Vernon, "so all aboard!"  
  
It was freezing in the boat. Icy sea spray and rain crept down their necks and a chilly wind whipped their faces. After what seemed like hours they reached the rock, where Uncle Vernon, slipping and sliding, led the way to the broken-down house.  
  
The inside was horrible; it smelled strongly of seaweed, the wind whistled through the gaps in the wooden walls, and the fireplace was damp and empty. There were only two rooms.  
  
Uncle Vernon's rations turned out to be a bag of chips each and four bananas. He tried to start a fire but the empty chip bags just smoked and shriveled up.  
  
"Could do with some of those letters now, eh?" he said cheerfully.  
  
He was in a very good mood. Obviously he thought nobody stood a chance of reaching them here in a storm to deliver mail. Harry privately agreed, though the thought didn't cheer him up at all.

As night fell, the promised storm blew up around them. Spray from the high waves splattered the walls of the hut and a fierce wind rattled the filthy windows. Aunt Petunia found a few moldy blankets in the second room and made up a bed for Dudley on the moth-eaten sofa. She and Uncle Vernon went off to the lumpy bed next door, and Harry was left to find the softest bit of floor he could and to curl up under the thinnest, most ragged blanket.  
  
The storm raged more and more ferociously as the night went on. Harry couldn't sleep. He shivered and turned over, trying to get comfortable, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Dudley's snores were drowned by the low rolls of thunder that started near midnight. The lighted dial of Dudley's watch, which was dangling over the edge of the sofa on his fat wrist, told Harry he'd be eleven in ten minutes' time. He lay and watched his birthday tick nearer, wondering if the Dursleys would remember at all, wondering where the letter writer was now.  
  
Five minutes to go. Harry heard something creak outside. He hoped the roof wasn't going to fall in, although he might be warmer if it did. Four minutes to go. Maybe the house in Privet Drive would be so full of letters when they got back that he'd be able to steal one somehow.  
  
Three minutes to go. Was that the sea, slapping hard on the rock like that? And (two minutes to go) what was that funny crunching noise? Was the rock crumbling into the sea?  
  
One minute to go and he'd be eleven. Thirty seconds. . . twenty. . . ten. . . nine -- maybe he'd wake Dudley up, just to annoy him -- three. . . two. . . one. . .  
  
BOOM.  
  
The whole shack shivered and Harry sat bolt upright, staring at the door. Someone was outside, knocking to come in.

**Chapter 4 The Keeper of the Keys**  
   
BOOM. They knocked again. Dudley jerked awake.  
  
"Where's the cannon?" he said stupidly.  
  
There was a crash behind them and Uncle Vernon came skidding into the room. He was holding a rifle in his hands - now they knew what had been in the long, thin package he had brought with them.  
  
"Who's there?" he shouted. "I warn you -- I'm armed!"  
  
There was a pause. Then --  
  
SMASH!  
  
The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.  
  
A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild, tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.  
  
The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at them all.  
  
"Couldn't make us a cup o' tea, could yeh? It's not been an easy journey. . . "  
  
He strode over to the sofa where Dudley sat frozen with fear.  
  
"Budge up, yeh great lump," said the stranger.  
  
Dudley squeaked and ran to hide behind his mother, who was crouching, terrified, behind Uncle Vernon.  
  
"An' here's Harry!" said the giant.  
  
Harry looked up into the fierce, wild, shadowy face and saw that the beetle eyes were crinkled in a smile.  
  
"Las' time I saw you, you was only a baby," said the giant. "Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes. "  
  
Uncle Vernon made a funny rasping noise.  
  
"I demand that you leave at once, sir!" he said. "You are breaking and entering!"  
  
"Ah, shut up, Dursley, yeh great prune," said the giant; he reached over the back of the sofa, jerked the gun out of Uncle Vernon's hands, bent it into a knot as easily as if it had been made of rubber, and threw it into a corner of the room.  
  
Uncle Vernon made another funny noise, like a mouse being trodden on.  
  
"Anyway -- Harry," said the giant, turning his back on the Dursleys, "a very happy birthday to yeh. Got summat fer yeh here -- I mighta sat on it at some point, but it'll taste all right. "

From an inside pocket of his black overcoat he pulled a slightly squashed box. Harry opened it with trembling fingers. Inside was a large, sticky chocolate cake with Happy Birthday Harry written on it in green icing.  
  
Harry looked up at the giant. He meant to say thank you, but the words got lost on the way to his mouth, and what he said instead was, "Who are you?"  
  
The giant chuckled.  
  
"True, I haven't introduced meself. Rubeus Hagrid, Keeper of Keys and Grounds at Hogwarts. "  
  
He held out an enormous hand and shook Harry's whole arm.  
  
"What about that tea then, eh?" he said, rubbing his hands together. "I'd not say no ter summat stronger if yeh've got it, mind. "  
  
His eyes fell on the empty grate with the shriveled chip bags in it and he snorted. He bent down over the fireplace; they couldn't see what he was doing but when he drew back a second later, there was a roaring fire there. It filled the whole damp hut with flickering light and Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath.  
  
The giant sat back down on the sofa, which sagged under his weight, and began taking all sorts of things out of the pockets of his coat: a copper kettle, a squashy package of sausages, a poker, a teapot, several chipped mugs, and a bottle of some amber liquid that he took a swig from before starting to make tea. Soon the hut was full of the sound and smell of sizzling sausage. Nobody said a thing while the giant was working, but as he slid the first six fat, juicy, slightly burnt sausages from the poker, Dudley fidgeted a little. Uncle Vernon said sharply, "Don't touch anything he gives you, Dudley. "  
  
The giant chuckled darkly.  
  
"Yer great puddin' of a son don' need fattenin' anymore, Dursley, don' worry. "  
  
He passed the sausages to Harry, who was so hungry he had never tasted anything so wonderful, but he still couldn't take his eyes off the giant. Finally, as nobody seemed about to explain anything, he said, "I'm sorry, but I still don't really know who you are. "  
  
The giant took a gulp of tea and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.  
  
"Call me Hagrid," he said, "everyone does. An' like I told yeh, I'm Keeper of Keys at Hogwarts -- yeh'll know all about Hogwarts, o' course.

"Er -- no," said Harry.  
  
Hagrid looked shocked.  
  
"Sorry," Harry said quickly.  
  
"Sorry ?" barked Hagrid, turning to stare at the Dursleys, who shrank back into the shadows. "It's them as should be sorry! I knew yeh weren't gettin' yer letters but I never thought yeh wouldn't even know abou' Hogwarts, fer cryin' out loud! Did yeh never wonder where yer parents learned it all?"  
  
"All what?" asked Harry.  
  
"ALL WHAT?" Hagrid thundered. "Now wait jus' one second!"  
  
He had leapt to his feet. In his anger he seemed to fill the whole hut. The Dursleys were cowering against the wall.  
  
"Do you mean ter tell me," he growled at the Dursleys, "that this boy -- this boy! -- knows nothin' abou' -- about ANYTHING?"  
  
Harry thought this was going a bit far. He had been to school, after all, and his marks weren't bad.  
  
"I know some things," he said. "I can, you know, do math and stuff. "  
  
But Hagrid simply waved his hand and said, "About our world, I mean. Your world. My world. Yer parents' world. "  
  
"What world?"  
  
Hagrid looked as if he was about to explode.  
  
"DURSLEY!" he boomed.  
  
Uncle Vernon, who had gone very pale, whispered something that sounded like "Mimblewimble. " Hagrid stared wildly at Harry.  
  
"But yeh must know about yer mom and dad," he said. "I mean, they're famous. You're famous. "  
  
"What? My -- my mom and dad weren't famous, were they?"  
  
"Yeh don' know. . . yeh don' know. . . " Hagrid ran his fingers through his hair, fixing Harry with a bewildered stare.  
  
"Yeh don' know what yeh are ?" he said finally.  
  
Uncle Vernon suddenly found his voice.  
  
"Stop!" he commanded. "Stop right there, sir! I forbid you to tell the boy anything!"  
  
A braver man than Vernon Dursley would have quailed under the furious look Hagrid now gave him; when Hagrid spoke, his every syllable trembled with rage.  
  
"You never told him? Never told him what was in the letter Dumbledore left fer him? I was there! I saw Dumbledore leave it, Dursley! An' you've kept it from him all these years?"

"Kept what from me?" said Harry eagerly.  
  
"STOP! I FORBID YOU!" yelled Uncle Vernon in panic.  
  
Aunt Petunia gave a gasp of horror.  
  
"Ah, go boil yer heads, both of yeh," said Hagrid. "Harry -- yer a wizard. "  
  
There was silence inside the hut. Only the sea and the whistling wind could be heard.  
  
"I'm a what ?" gasped Harry.  
  
"A wizard, o' course," said Hagrid, sitting back down on the sofa, which groaned and sank even lower, "an' a thumpin' good 'un, I'd say, once yeh've been trained up a bit. With a mum an' dad like yours, what else would yeh be? An' I reckon it's abou' time yeh read yer letter. "  
  
Harry stretched out his hand at last to take the yellowish envelope, addressed in emerald green to Mr. H. Potter, The Floor, Hut-on-the-Rock, The Sea. He pulled out the letter and read:  
  
HOGWARTS SCHOOL of WITCHCRAFT and WIZARDRY  
  
Headmaster: ALBUS DUMBLEDORE  
  
(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grand Sorc. , Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)  
  
Dear Mr. Potter,  
  
We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.  
  
Term begins on September 1. We await your owl by no later than July 31.  
  
Yours sincerely,  
  
Minerva McGonagall,  
  
Deputy Headmistress  
  
Questions exploded inside Harry's head like fireworks and he couldn't decide which to ask first. After a few minutes he stammered, "What does it mean, they await my owl?"  
  
"Gallopin' Gorgons, that reminds me," said Hagrid, clapping a hand to his forehead with enough force to knock over a cart horse, and from yet another pocket inside his overcoat he pulled an owl -- a real, live, rather ruffled-looking owl -- a long quill, and a roll of parchment. With his tongue between his teeth he scribbled a note that Harry could read upside down:  
  
Dear Professor Dumbledore,  
  
Given Harry his letter.  
  
Taking him to buy his things tomorrow.

Weather's horrible. Hope you're well.  
  
Hagrid  
  
Hagrid rolled up the note, gave it to the owl, which clamped it in its beak, went to the door, and threw the owl out into the storm. Then he came back and sat down as though this was as normal as talking on the telephone.  
  
Harry realized his mouth was open and closed it quickly.  
  
"Where was I?" said Hagrid, but at that moment, Uncle Vernon, still ashen-faced but looking very angry, moved into the firelight.  
  
"He's not going," he said.  
  
Hagrid grunted.  
  
"I'd like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him," he said.  
  
"A what?" said Harry, interested.  
  
"A Muggle," said Hagrid, "it's what we call nonmagic folk like them. An' it's your bad luck you grew up in a family o' the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on. "  
  
"We swore when we took him in we'd put a stop to that rubbish," said Uncle Vernon, "swore we'd stamp it out of him! Wizard indeed!"  
  
"You knew ?" said Harry. "You knew I'm a -- a wizard?"  
  
"Knew!" shrieked Aunt Petunia suddenly. "Knew! Of course we knew! How could you not be, my dratted sister being what she was? Oh, she got a letter just like that and disappeared off to that -- that school -- and came home every vacation with her pockets full of frog spawn, turning teacups into rats. I was the only one who saw her for what she was -- a freak! But for my mother and father, oh no, it was Lily this and Lily that, they were proud of having a witch in the family!"  
  
She stopped to draw a deep breath and then went ranting on. It seemed she had been wanting to say all this for years.  
  
"Then she met that Potter at school and they left and got married and had you, and of course I knew you'd be just the same, just as strange, just as -- as -- abnormal -- and then, if you please, she went and got herself blown up and we got landed with you!"  
  
Harry had gone very white. As soon as he found his voice he said, "Blown up? You told me they died in a car crash!"  
  
"CAR CRASH!" roared Hagrid, jumping up so angrily that the Dursleys scuttled back to their corner. "How could a car crash kill Lily an' James Potter? It's an outrage! A scandal! Harry Potter not knowin' his own story when every kid in our world knows his name!"

"But why? What happened?" Harry asked urgently.  
  
The anger faded from Hagrid's face. He looked suddenly anxious.  
  
"I never expected this," he said, in a low, worried voice. "I had no idea, when Dumbledore told me there might be trouble gettin' hold of yeh, how much yeh didn't know. Ah, Harry, I don' know if I'm the right person ter tell yeh -- but someone's gotta -- yeh can't go off ter Hogwarts not knowin'. "  
  
He threw a dirty look at the Dursleys.  
  
"Well, it's best yeh know as much as I can tell yeh -- mind, I can't tell yeh everythin', it's a great myst'ry, parts of it. . . "  
  
He sat down, stared into the fire for a few seconds, and then said, "It begins, I suppose, with -- with a person called -- but it's incredible yeh don't know his name, everyone in our world knows--"  
  
"Who?"  
  
"Well -- I don' like sayin' the name if I can help it. No one does. "  
  
"Why not?"  
  
"Gulpin' gargoyles, Harry, people are still scared. Blimey, this is difficult. See, there was this wizard who went. . . bad. As bad as you could go. Worse. Worse than worse. His name was. . . "  
  
Hagrid gulped, but no words came out.  
  
"Could you write it down?" Harry suggested.  
  
"Nah -- can't spell it. All right -- Voldemort. " Hagrid shuddered. "Don' make me say it again. Anyway, this -- this wizard, about twenty years ago now, started lookin' fer followers. Got 'em, too -- some were afraid, some just wanted a bit o' his power, 'cause he was gettin' himself power, all right. Dark days, Harry. Didn't know who ter trust, didn't dare get friendly with strange wizards or witches. . . terrible things happened. He was takin' over. 'Course, some stood up to him -- an' he killed 'em. Horribly. One o' the only safe places left was Hogwarts. Reckon Dumbledore's the only one You-Know-Who was afraid of. Didn't dare try takin' the school, not jus' then, anyway.  
  
"Now, yer mum an' dad were as good a witch an' wizard as I ever knew. Head boy an' girl at Hogwarts in their day! Suppose the myst'ry is why You-Know-Who never tried to get 'em on his side before. . . probably knew they were too close ter Dumbledore ter want anythin' ter do with the Dark Side.

"Maybe he thought he could persuade 'em. . . maybe he just wanted 'em outta the way. All anyone knows is, he turned up in the village where you was all living, on Halloween ten years ago. You was just a year old. He came ter yer house an' -- an'--"  
  
Hagrid suddenly pulled out a very dirty, spotted handkerchief and blew his nose with a sound like a foghorn.  
  
"Sorry," he said. "But it's that sad -- knew yer mum an' dad, an' nicer people yeh couldn't find -- anyway. . .  
  
"You-Know-Who killed 'em. An' then -- an' this is the real myst'ry of the thing -- he tried to kill you, too. Wanted ter make a clean job of it, I suppose, or maybe he just liked killin' by then. But he couldn't do it. Never wondered how you got that mark on yer forehead? That was no ordinary cut. That's what yeh get when a powerful, evil curse touches yeh -- took care of yer mum an' dad an' yer house, even -- but it didn't work on you, an' that's why yer famous, Harry. No one ever lived after he decided ter kill 'em, no one except you, an' he'd killed some o' the best witches an' wizards of the age -- the McKinnons, the Bones, the Prewetts -- an' you was only a baby, an' you lived. "  
  
Something very painful was going on in Harry's mind. As Hagrid's story came to a close, he saw again the blinding flash of green light, more clearly than he had ever remembered it before -- and he remembered something else, for the first time in his life: a high, cold, cruel laugh.  
  
Hagrid was watching him sadly.  
  
"Took yeh from the ruined house myself, on Dumbledore's orders. Brought yeh ter this lot. . . "  
  
"Load of old tosh," said Uncle Vernon. Harry jumped; he had almost forgotten that the Dursleys were there. Uncle Vernon certainly seemed to have got back his courage. He was glaring at Hagrid and his fists were clenched.  
  
"Now, you listen here, boy," he snarled, "I accept there's something strange about you, probably nothing a good beating wouldn't have cured -- and as for all this about your parents, well, they were weirdoes, no denying it, and the world's better off without them in my opinion -- asked for all they got, getting mixed up with these wizarding types -- just what I expected, always knew they'd come to a sticky end--"

But at that moment, Hagrid leapt from the sofa and drew a battered pink umbrella from inside his coat. Pointing this at Uncle Vernon like a sword, he said, "I'm warning you, Dursley -- I'm warning you -- one more word. . . "  
  
In danger of being speared on the end of an umbrella by a bearded giant, Uncle Vernon's courage failed again; he flattened himself against the wall and fell silent.  
  
"That's better," said Hagrid, breathing heavily and sitting back down on the sofa, which this time sagged right down to the floor.  
  
Harry, meanwhile, still had questions to ask, hundreds of them.  
  
"But what happened to Vol-, sorry -- I mean, You-Know-Who?"  
  
"Good question, Harry. Disappeared. Vanished. Same night he tried ter kill you. Makes yeh even more famous. That's the biggest myst'ry, see. . . he was gettin' more an' more powerful -- why'd he go?  
  
"Some say he died. Codswallop, in my opinion. Dunno if he had enough human left in him to die. Some say he's still out there, bidin' his time, like, but I don' believe it. People who was on his side came back ter ours. Some of 'em came outta kinda trances. Don' reckon they could've done if he was comin' back.  
  
"Most of us reckon he's still out there somewhere but lost his powers. Too weak to carry on. 'Cause somethin' about you finished him, Harry. There was somethin' goin' on that night he hadn't counted on -- I dunno what it was, no one does -- but somethin' about you stumped him, all right. "  
  
Hagrid looked at Harry with warmth and respect blazing in his eyes, but Harry, instead of feeling pleased and proud, felt quite sure there had been a horrible mistake. A wizard? Him? How could he possibly be? He'd spent his life being clouted by Dudley, and bullied by Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon; if he was really a wizard, why hadn't they been turned into warty toads every time they'd tried to lock him in his cupboard? If he'd once defeated the greatest sorcerer in the world, how come Dudley had always been able to kick him around like a football?

"Hagrid," he said quietly, "I think you must have made a mistake. I don't think I can be a wizard. "  
  
To his surprise, Hagrid chuckled.  
  
"Not a wizard, eh? Never made things happen when you was scared or angry?"  
  
Harry looked into the fire. Now he came to think about it. . . every odd thing that had ever made his aunt and uncle furious with him had happened when he, Harry, had been upset or angry. . . chased by Dudley's gang, he had somehow found himself out of their reach. . . dreading going to school with that ridiculous haircut, he'd managed to make it grow back. . . and the very last time Dudley had hit him, hadn't he got his revenge, without even realizing he was doing it? Hadn't he set a boa constrictor on him?  
  
Harry looked back at Hagrid, smiling, and saw that Hagrid was positively beaming at him.  
  
"See?" said Hagrid. "Harry Potter, not a wizard -- you wait, you'll be right famous at Hogwarts. "  
  
But Uncle Vernon wasn't going to give in without a fight.  
  
"Haven't I told you he's not going?" he hissed. "He's going to Stonewall High and he'll be grateful for it. I've read those letters and he needs all sorts of rubbish -- spell books and wands and--"  
  
"If he wants ter go, a great Muggle like you won't stop him," growled Hagrid. "Stop Lily an' James Potter's son goin' ter Hogwarts! Yer mad. His name's been down ever since he was born. He's off ter the finest school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world. Seven years there and he won't know himself. He'll be with youngsters of his own sort, fer a change, an' he'll be under the greatest headmaster Hogwarts ever had Albus Dumbled--"  
  
"I AM NOT PAYING FOR SOME CRACKPOT OLD FOOL TO TEACH HIM MAGIC TRICKS!" yelled Uncle Vernon.  
  
But he had finally gone too far. Hagrid seized his umbrella and whirled it over his head, "NEVER -- " he thundered, " -- INSULT -- ALBUS -- DUMBLEDORE -- IN -- FRONT -- OF -- ME!"  
  
He brought the umbrella swishing down through the air to point at Dudley -- there was a flash of violet light, a sound like a firecracker, a sharp squeal, and the next second, Dudley was dancing on the spot with his hands clasped over his fat bottom, howling in pain. When he turned his back on them, Harry saw a curly pig's tail poking through a hole in his trousers.

Uncle Vernon roared. Pulling Aunt Petunia and Dudley into the other room, he cast one last terrified look at Hagrid and slammed the door behind them.  
  
Hagrid looked down at his umbrella and stroked his beard.  
  
"Shouldn'ta lost me temper," he said ruefully, "but it didn't work anyway. Meant ter turn him into a pig, but I suppose he was so much like a pig anyway there wasn't much left ter do. "  
  
He cast a sideways look at Harry under his bushy eyebrows.  
  
"Be grateful if yeh didn't mention that ter anyone at Hogwarts," he said. "I'm -- er -- not supposed ter do magic, strictly speakin'. I was allowed ter do a bit ter follow yeh an' get yer letters to yeh an' stuff -- one o' the reasons I was so keen ter take on the job. "  
  
"Why aren't you supposed to do magic?" asked Harry.  
  
"Oh, well -- I was at Hogwarts meself but I -- er -- got expelled, ter tell yeh the truth. In me third year. They snapped me wand in half an' everything. But Dumbledore let me stay on as gamekeeper. Great man, Dumbledore. "  
  
"Why were you expelled?"  
  
"It's gettin' late and we've got lots ter do tomorrow," said Hagrid loudly. "Gotta get up ter town, get all yer books an' that. "  
  
He took off his thick black coat and threw it to Harry.  
  
"You can kip under that," he said. "Don' mind if it wriggles a bit, I think I still got a couple o' doormice in one o' the pockets. "